

Clerk's Office Hit on Sirhan Evidence

BY DOUG SHUIT

Times Staff Writer

The weekend disclosure that evidence in the Robert F. Kennedy slaying may have been altered led Monday to developments which focused attention on the Los Angeles County Clerk's Office.

The developments were:

—An order to County Clerk William Sharp to inspect his office for possible security breaches, to reevaluate its control system and to inventory exhibits and transcripts from the Sirhan Bishara Sirhan trial.

—A statement by Sharp that a personal investigation has "failed to disclose any mishandling" of key exhibits, although there are "still some stones unturned."

—The revelation by an aide to Dist. Atty. Joseph A. Busch Jr. that "some employees of the clerk's office" are being given lie detector tests.

Busch said last week his office was "terribly concerned" over evidence that the fatal bullets and murder weapon in the assassination had been tampered with.

He also said he and his staff are investigating "evidence that exhi-

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bits have been directly handled by numerous persons," a violation of a court order sealing them.

The clerk's office was charged with maintaining the integrity of evidence in the Sirhan trial pending an appeal.

The order to Sharp came from Supervisor Kenneth Hahn, who oversees the operation of the County Clerks Office.

Hahn also directed the county's chief administrative officer, Arthur G. Will, to determine if the clerk's office needs additional precautionary equipment.

"The county clerk also is clerk of the Superior Court," Hahn said. "This responsible duty sometimes is taken for granted except where there are appeals in connection with noted crimes and exceptional court cases."

Busch's aide, in revealing that some employees of Sharp were being asked to take polygraph examinations, declined to identify the men or specify the number.

In his disclosure last week, the district attorney did not say whether he considered the possible tampering intentional or unintentional.

However, he stressed it complicates an earlier investigation into claims that ballistics work in the Kennedy case was improper and that a second gun may have been fired in the rear pantry of the Ambassador where the late President's brother was mor-

County Clerk Defends Sirhan Case Security

Tells Supervisors He Found No Tampering With Key Exhibits Entered Into Evidence

BY DAVE SMITH

Times Staff Writer

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L.A. Times

Los Angeles County Clerk William G. Sharp explained Tuesday the procedure his office used to protect evidence before, during and after the Sirhan Bishara Sirhan trial and insisted he has found no evidence of tampering with key exhibits.

In a letter to the Board of Supervisors, Sharp offered his "complete cooperation" with the district attorney's office in a probe of possibilities that evidence in the assassination of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy—including the fatal bullets, murder weapon and the senator's coat—may have been tampered with since Sirhan's conviction.

Sharp conceded that the exhibits have been viewed, but said he has no evidence that anyone but attorneys connected with the case, or their agents, have had the opportunity to handle the key exhibits themselves.

Right to See Exhibits

"It's absolutely true the exhibits have been available," Sharp said, "and everybody had a right to see them—the press and everybody else. It's a question whether they had access to certain 'hard' exhibits."

After the Sirhan trial concluded, Superior Judge Herbert V. Walker ordered certain key exhibits "sealed" by a court order. But Sharp said, the court order permitted "counsel of record" and attorneys for both the prosecution and defense, as well as agents for those attorneys, access to the crucial exhibits.

Sharp said a list of persons asking to examine the exhibits has been kept by his office. He estimated that several dozen names were in the records. Among them, he said, were those of Luke McKissack, Sirhan's defense counsel in his automatic appeal before the Supreme Court, and William Harper, criminalist and ballistics expert who has contended that ballistics work in the original investigation was done improperly. Sharp said Harper was granted access as an agent of McKissack.

Sharp told the supervisors:

"At the outset of the case I in-

structed the criminal division of my office to provide the strictest security to Sirhan exhibits, and I personally inspected the security measures which were instituted.

"Prior to the trial, the exhibits were held in a walk-in vault to which only exhibit clerks had access—and within a safe within that vault to which only the chief, the assistant chief and the supervisor of exhibits had access.

"During the course of the trial the exhibits were transferred to the courtroom where they were given special security by the courtroom clerk. At the conclusion of the trial the exhibits were transferred back to the vault and placed under special security."

Sharp admitted that special secur-

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ity could have been breached in the Sirhan evidence, but said he has no knowledge of it. In normal cases, he said, the public is entitled to view evidence in any case where no court order forbids it. But even then the evidence is restricted to an area kept under close surveillance.

Dist. Atty. Joseph Busch revealed over the weekend that his office was "terribly concerned" over evidence that the fatal bullets and the gun in the Kennedy case might have been deliberately or inadvertently tampered with.

This possibility could obscure an earlier investigation into charges that ballistics work in the Sirhan trial violated scientific procedure.

Those charges, based on Harper's private investigation, were lodged by attorney Barbara Warner Blehr in an effort to block the appointment of police criminalist DeWayne Wolfer as head of the Los Angeles Police Department crime lab.

Harper and Mrs. Blehr have questioned whether there might have been a second gunman firing at Kennedy in addition to Sirhan—a question which only ballistics investigation conceivably could support.

Sharp told the supervisors that his office has over 160,000 criminal exhibits on hand at any given time and takes in about 50,000 each year. "Controls have long been established for their security," Sharp said, "and special controls for all exhibits involved in death penalty cases are also effected."

Sharp, who was ordered

by Supervisor Kenneth Hahn to inspect his office for possible security breaches, said Tuesday he had sent an aide to San Francisco to itemize all exhibits forwarded by the clerk's office to the Supreme Court for the review of Sirhan's conviction and death sentence.

tally wounded June 5, 1968.

Extensive tampering might make it impossible to either prove or disprove these contentions.

Harold